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Recruiting effort underway to draw students

by Michael Kelly, Propulsion Directorate

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AIR FORCE BASE, Ohio — The Air Force Research Laboratory wants top-notch high school students throughout the Dayton area who are interested in science and engineering careers to take a look at their 2003 Wright Scholar Research Assistant program.

The program for promising young scientists is sponsored by AFRL's Propulsion Directorate and applications are now being accepted for its second year. The program is targeted at high school juniors and seniors in the base commuting area.

Selectees will assist with on-site research and apply their knowledge of chemistry, physics and mathematics to various types of engineering careers, according to John Horner, Wright Scholar program manager. The students are employed for 30-40 hours per week as a GS-1 or GS-2 for up to 10 weeks, and work under the guidance of a volunteer mentor who provides a research project to pursue.

Horner said the program has been a tremendous success. Last year, selection committee reviewers considered 129 local student applications to choose the 27 inaugural Wright Scholars, who represented 19 Dayton area high schools. Twenty of those students are returning, and Horner hopes to expand next year's number to allow even more young people to explore futures in Air Force science and technology career fields.

Ultimately, Horner and his team of scientists and engineers are hopeful the Wright Scholar program and others like it will generate a pool of highly qualified individuals the Air Force can draw on to fill looming critical shortages of scientists and engineers.

Of the Air Force's 13,300 military and civilian scientist and engineer authorizations, the service is short approximately 2,700 – or about 20 percent, according to Air Force Materiel Command personnel officials. And that's if they only had to fill current vacancies, not expected future shortages, officials said.

Gen. Lester L. Lyles, commander Air Force Materiel Command, and a champion for strengthening the Air Force's science and technology team, supports recruiting and scholarship programs like the Wright Scholars.

"When President Kennedy challenged us to put a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s, it created a stir in the middle and high school youth and inspired them to pursue an education to fulfill that challenge," Lyles said. "We are still resting on those laurels and to some extent, the experience of those same individuals.

"To generate the excitement required to entice our youth to a science and engineering future, we must restore a national vision and strategy for the aerospace industry," he said. "We must capture the hearts, souls and minds of our youth to successfully compete in the future."

A series of briefings at local schools is designed to do just that.

High schoolers throughout the Dayton area are already getting a firsthand look at summer employment opportunities within several AFRL technical directorates during presentations designed to launch their interest in science and technology.

More than 70 students at West Carrolton High attended the inaugural briefing at their school Oct. 1.

Tess Huggins, trigonometry and pre-calculus teacher at West Carrolton, thinks the Wright Scholar program would be a great experience for her students.

"This is a tremendous opportunity for these kids to get some real world experience in science and engineering," said the math teacher and National Honor Society advisor. "I think it will give them a chance to see how important math principles are and how they're applied in research and development. It will also help them start a network of people who can help them in their careers."

More briefings are planned at Dayton area high schools in the coming months, said Rebecca Oriakhi, the program's administrator.

More information on the program, as well as application packages, are available at http://www.pr.afrl.af.mil/jobs/scholar.htm. The application deadline is midnight, Jan. 17, 2003.

Students will be notified of their selections in March and start work in June, Oriakhi said. @